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ABSTRACT

This booklet explains that strong parental involvement in a child's education and school environment is essential to the success of the child and the school. It explores culturally biased beliefs many educators frequently have toward their students and their students' families, examining a variety of ways in which educators and parents can work together to benefit students. The booklet describes key assumptions of culturally responsive parental involvement (e.g., diverse cultural backgrounds of families demand new strategies to encourage parental involvement, parents want to be involved in their children's education, and partnerships are key to successful reform). Next, it examines common misconceptions (e.g., parents who do not visit schools do not care about their children's education, good parental involvement looks a certain way, and all parents respond to the same strategies). Finally, it presents concrete steps for initiating culturally responsive parental involvement (e.g., inventory parents' concerns, perspectives, and ideas; plan a series of parent-teacher seminars or parent-teacher team building activities based on surveys of parent interests and needs; assign a family liaison; and develop a school cultural resources binder). (SM)

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Culturally Responsive Parental Involvement

Concrete Understandings and Basic Strategies

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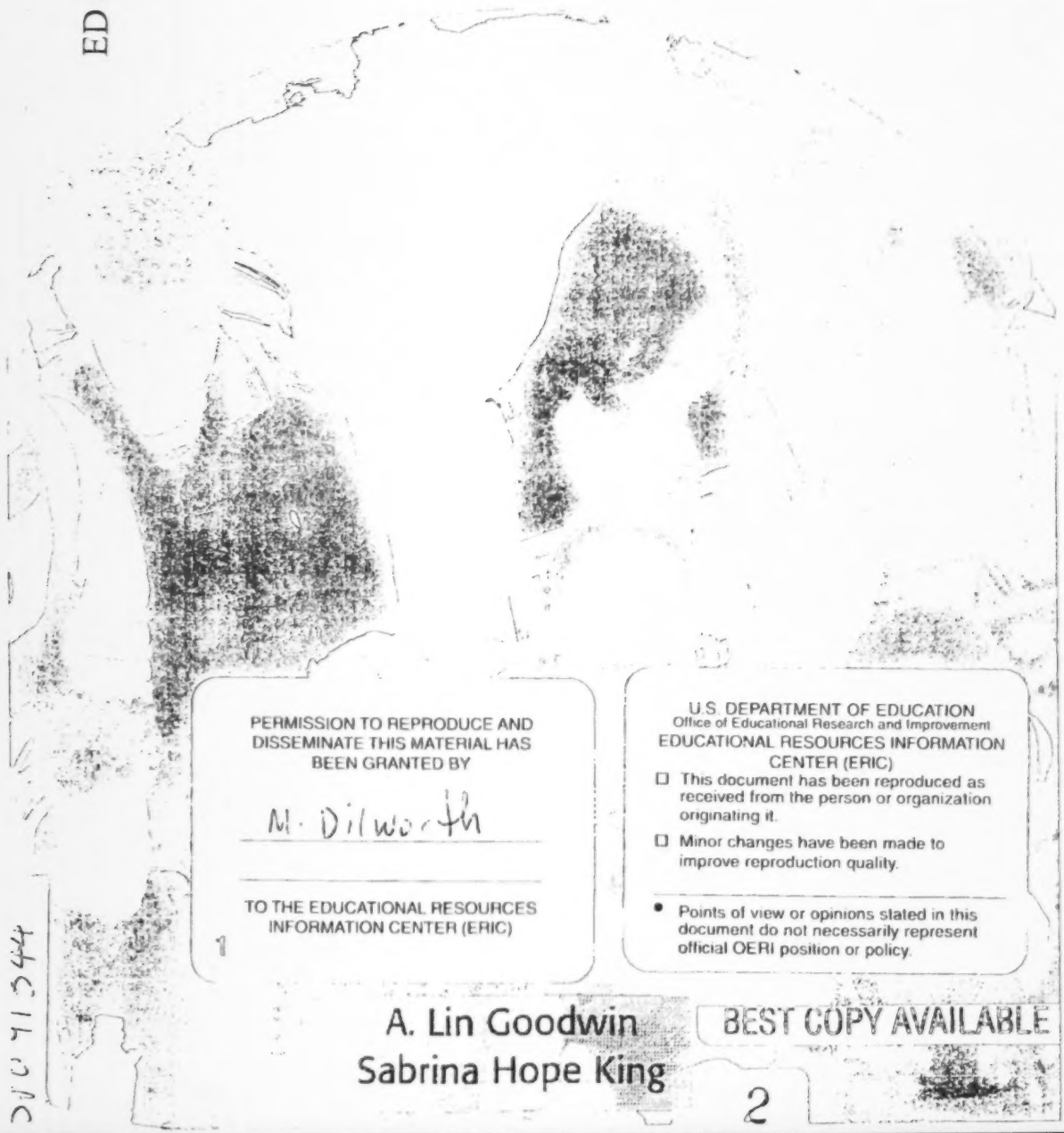

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Introduction

Strong parental involvement in a child's education and school environment is essential to the success of the child and the school. Such parental involvement is an ongoing, comprehensive, purposeful, and relentless process designed to ensure parents' connection to the school's culture, purpose, and organization. Yet meaningful parental involvement has traditionally eluded schools. It is typically limited to parent-teacher conferences, and even then, teachers decry parents' inconsistent attendance or continued absence. Even in those schools where parental involvement is considered strong, only *some* parents are involved, or they are invited to the school by the teachers or administrators. Dedicated parental involvement exists only when there is a system in place to include all parents in the life and development of the school.

School norms and structures have historically been, and continue to be, most responsive to parents who are middle-class, able-bodied, U.S.-born, and standard-English-speaking individuals. Although these norms seem firmly entrenched in most schools, there is an urgent need for schools to include more diverse populations as the nation's demographics continue to change.

This booklet explores culturally biased beliefs many educators frequently have toward their students and their students' families. It also explores a variety of ways educators and parents can work together to benefit students. In exploring these beliefs, assumptions, and suggested methods, we, the authors, hope that our readers—teachers, administrators, parents, prospective teachers, and teacher educators—develop an understanding of what culturally responsive parental involvement truly is.

We acknowledge that the term *parent* is problematic and can be limiting. However, in this booklet, we use the term inclusively to indicate any adult person who has responsibility for the care and welfare of a child within a family grouping or family community. Thus, for our purposes, parents might include grandmothers, older siblings, same-sex couples, or other responsible adults. In addition to offering tips that most any educator can emulate, this booklet examines and encourages parental involvement that is active, consistent, and inclusive. We label this kind of involvement *culturally responsive* because it acknowledges that families have varied backgrounds, beliefs, and values. It recognizes that definitions of family are evolving and complex and that parents want and need to be involved in their children's schools.

Key Assumptions of Culturally Responsive Parental Involvement

Our vision of culturally responsive parental involvement is grounded in several key assumptions that exemplify realities in school and society and cannot be ignored:

Changing Demographics Demand That Teachers and Administrators Alter Preconceived Notions About a Child's Family Experiences and Structure

- 2000 census data confirm an increase in new majority "minority" populations.
- By 2020, children of color will constitute 46% of the public school population.
- Approximately 40 million people in the U.S. speak a maternal language that is not English.
- Teachers in cities such as New York and Los Angeles are facing classes of students who speak a dozen or more different languages and dialects. This dynamic is occurring in suburban areas as well.

Diverse Cultural Backgrounds of Families Demand New Strategies to Encourage Parental Involvement

> *When I called parents to participate in a school project, I was pleased and surprised by their responses. One mother responded (as translated by her 12-year-old daughter): "I don't understand English and I won't be able to talk. I don't want to take up space for another parent who will be able to talk and understand. I feel bad if I take someone else's spot." I was so amazed by her response that I assured her that it would be a huge loss for the group if she didn't come aboard. Her comment truly touched me. I began to wonder if this was the way she felt when she attended school meetings as a result of her two daughters' being in my class.*—Teacher

- More and more parents speak languages other than English or may speak several English dialects.
- The parents and families joining our schools may have had different, few, or no experiences with formal education. Consequently, they bring new expectations and challenges to schools.
- Parents who are immigrants may be undergoing cultural dissonance and acculturation.

Meaningful Parental Involvement Can Enhance Student Success

- Parents know their children best, are in the best position to inform schools about their children's needs and capacities, and are deeply invested in their children's success.
- The future economic and moral success of our nation depends on the success of every child in school today.
- In our information-rich, technological society, every child needs to be well educated and properly prepared.

Parents Want To Be Involved in Their Child's Education

It's hard to communicate with [teachers]. Sometimes, I want to get a point across and I think in Spanish first and [therefore] begin talking in Spanish. I know they won't understand.—Parent

- Parents want to be supportive of their children and want to participate in their children's educational success.
- It is the school's responsibility to figure out how to welcome parents into the educational process while supporting their engagement.
- Assuming that parents have the best interests of their children in mind, what is the best way to initiate school-home relationships?
- School faculty must let go of narrow definitions of parental involvement to facilitate multilevel parental involvement.
- School faculty must examine their own attitudes about parents, discard negative or inaccurate assumptions, and make a strong commitment to working with parents.

Parents Who Are Involved Do Not Represent the Views and Needs of All Parents

One year a teacher told me that my child was lovely. That's not what I asked. I asked her how my child was doing in school. I already know that my child is lovely.—Parent

- Parental involvement can be inclusive only if the parents adequately represent the school population in terms of race, class, gender, socioeconomic status, geography, family structure, religious background, cultural heritage, and other characteristics. This can only happen with ongoing dialogue between teachers and parents.
- Too often, the parents who are involved are those who feel the most comfortable in schools—typically those who are White, English-speaking, and/or middle class.

- School faculty often fail to recognize when parents are absent because they are not familiar enough with the parents to notice they are missing and why.

Parents Need to Be Informed About What Is Happening in Schools

- Parents can support schools only if they are kept abreast of the changes occurring in school practices and instruction.
- Parents who are poorly informed cannot participate fully in schools.
- Parents who are partially informed must rely on the media and politicians to educate them; neither group knows teaching and learning as well as education professionals.

Partnerships Are Key to Successful Reform

> *Nobody wants his or her child to feel frustrated. No parent wishes that. But sometimes it is hard to help at home. You don't know how the teacher does it. I always hear from my grandson, "That's not how my teacher wants me to do it." I want to help him at home the way he's doing in school, but it's not easy.*—Parent

- The African proverb "It takes a whole village to raise a child" reminds us that teachers cannot educate children alone.
- Parents and their children's communities should be schools' first allies and partners.
- Parents as allies are far more productive than parents as adversaries or passive observers.

Parents and Schools Must Develop Strategies to Work Together

> *I was motivated to discuss race and culture with parents but did not know how to begin or how parents would react. Our mission statement [developed through a project] turned out to be a great way to initiate these conversations directly with parents. Parents told me how excited and thankful they were to be able to talk about these issues in school.*—Teacher

Productive, mutually respectful, dialogic relationships do not simply happen. Without concrete structures that define activities, mission, accountability, responsibility, and evaluation, efforts to build strong, consistent, and comprehensive parental involvement will be in vain.

Common Misconceptions

We believe that culturally responsive parental involvement is neither complicated nor mysterious, but it requires the will and commitment to

serve all children equitably. Culturally responsive parental involvement also works to alter faulty perceptions that interrupt school-home dialogue and fuel misunderstandings between teachers and parents. The following are common misconceptions that need to be closely examined and challenged.

Misconception #1: Parents Who Don't Visit School Don't Care About Their Child's Education

> *One of the most interesting yet most frustrating occurrences that I encounter is the way my colleagues speak about the families in our school. I hear, "These families don't care," "Nobody shows up," "School is the only structure these kids have," and "These kids are culturally deprived." After successfully implementing two parent meetings that were both well attended, I feel like I have to constantly defend the parents. I tell fellow teachers that I had most of my students' parents show up for a meeting in the summer before school even started. I tell them that I had 15 adults attend my second meeting and they ARE interested in their children; they DO care about them. I have learned that blaming the families has become a convenient way for teachers to explain low test scores and failing programs.*—Teacher

School administrators and educators often see physical presence as "the" sign of parental concern. However, there are many reasons why parents might not visit their child's school. Parents may feel intimidated by teachers, whom they often view as authority figures. Parents may be working several jobs or may be reluctant to visit the school just to hear—yet again—that their child is troubled or failing. Many parents demonstrate their caring by working hard to provide their children with the basic necessities; for many parents, providing an adequate home life for their child is equivalent to caring about their child's educational success. When educators assume that a lack of caring is the reason parents are absent, they only reveal the absence of their own caring and effectively shut down all communication channels. If school faculty are unable to meet with a parent in person, there are alternative ways of getting input and having dialogue with the parent, such as e-mail, phone calls, and letters. Again, dialogue—in whatever form—between parents and teaching faculty is critical. Teachers must be willing to engage parents regardless of parents' past behaviors. The next time a teacher reaches out to a parent may be the time a parent reaches back.

Misconception #2: Good Parental Involvement "Looks" a Certain Way

Pervasive definitions of appropriate parenting behaviors, such as reading to children every night, often have their roots in middle-class norms.

Parents who do not conform to these implicit rules become easy targets for parent-bashing. Schools too quickly blame such parents for their children's failures instead of examining their own images of good parenting in order to ensure that certain ways of rearing children are not condemned when compared to others.

Misconception #3: All Parents Respond to the Same Strategies

Like students, parents will evidence different needs, experiences, questions, learning, and styles of interacting with others. A strategy that draws one group of parents to school may completely alienate another group. Universal strategies such as parent-teacher conferences, open houses, and active involvement in the PTA cannot be expected to work for everyone and invariably will exclude some parents from becoming involved.

Misconception #4: Parents Who Are Struggling Financially Cannot Support the School

> *In a classroom in East Harlem, the majority of the African-American and Latino children are poor and live in nearby projects. But their parents provide the school with many wonderful resources. One parent supplies the math center with unusual bottle caps. Each time a new bottle cap comes into the classroom, children are drawn into deep discussions about color, comparison, and symbols. A classroom grandmother keeps her eye out for the best sales so when the school needs certain supplies, they can, with her help, make the most of their limited resources.*—Teacher

If teachers and administrators think of support from parents in monetary terms only, parents who are struggling financially will be deemed unable to contribute to their child's school. However, inviting parents to contribute in ways that are creative, do not necessarily involve money or a great deal of time, and expand notions of assistance or expertise will help parents to feel empowered and relevant to the school's mission.

Misconception #5: All Parents Have the Same Goals for Their Children

Teachers and administrators should not assume they know what goals and aspirations parents have for their children. Teacher-parent dialogue is critical to ensure that meaningful, relevant conversations occur about each student's goals. This is also why incorporating diverse teaching styles and educational content into a classroom is so important.

Educators are not alone in making inaccurate assumptions; parents may also have misconceptions, such as these:

- *I didn't do well in school, so I can't help my child.*
- *Teachers and administrators do not understand my reality.*
- *Teachers don't care because they don't discipline my child properly and don't expect enough of her/him.*
- *I work full-time so I can't be as active in my child's education as I would like.*

The first step toward culturally responsive parental involvement is for educators and families to come together to acknowledge, discuss, and dispel assumptions, biases, and stereotypes. Creating such a dialogue requires that schoolteachers and administrators take immediate action to open communication channels.

Concrete Steps: Reaching Out and Staying Focused

In this section, we offer simple strategies that teachers and administrators can use to initiate culturally responsive parental involvement. Most of these strategies are quite simple and are not meant to be exhaustive. Rather, they represent first steps, or ways to begin. These strategies may seem like basic requirements that all schools would implement. Many of these strategies are common sense, which is why it was surprising for us to learn that even some of the simplest strategies are not being used at all—or enough—by schools. Therefore, even the most basic techniques mentioned deserve a detailed explanation.

Strategies Schoolteachers and Administrators Should Engage

1. **Clearly express their commitment to meaningful and culturally responsive parental involvement by writing a mission statement and setting goals.**
   In preparation for the meeting, I thought about ways to introduce the idea of feeling empowered as parents. I put a packet together that included our mission statement [from a project], the three principles of learning [standards], and a Native American book, Children of the E, *by Stephen Krensky. I wanted the parents to have this particular book because it will be used in their children's classrooms for social studies. I thought it would mean a lot for these parents to have access to a text their children will be using in school.*—Teacher

A mission statement would initiate conversations among school faculty about parental involvement and how it can become more inclusive and respectful of diversity. A mission statement also sends an important message to the entire community about school priorities and ensures that parental involvement becomes a point of accountability and a lens for self-review and evaluation. The mission statement should be shared

with parents and families for their feedback and comments and periodically revisited and revised.

2. **Inventory parents' concerns, perspectives, and ideas.**
A parent survey should capture as many parental perspectives as possible. It could be administered in class meetings with parents, through the mail or e-mail (translated into languages spoken by parents), as a class assignment by older students, during formal parent-teacher conferences, with the help of local community organizations and leaders or other parents, or in an ongoing, informal manner during morning drop-off or afternoon pickup of students. The survey/interview would help schools come to know the cultural identity and characteristics of the community.

Parents should be asked about the following:

- What languages are spoken in the home?
- What are the family's cultural practices and traditions?
- What are parents' previous experiences with schools, schooling, teachers, etc.?
- Do parents have culturally rich materials and resources that can be shared with the school?
- What are parents' hobbies, skills, interests, and talents?
- Do parents have scheduling issues, transportation needs, etc.?
- What are parents' working hours?
- What do parents see lacking in terms of diversity in their child's schoolwork?

The survey would also allow parents to tell teachers and administrators about their children through open-ended questions such as these:

- What would you like me to know about your child?
- What is working well for you and your child in this class or in this school (if the survey is administered at the beginning of the school year)?
- What concerns do you have about your child's academic progress, this class, or this school?
- What do you need to know more about?
- How do you think our class experience could be more meaningful for everyone?

- What are ways in which you would like your child's culture to be affirmed in school?
- What are examples of ways your child's culture has been negated in school?
- What should we do differently?
- What kinds of experiences or instructional materials would you like to be a part of your child's experience at school?

Finally, the survey could be used to poll parents about their interests and needs—what they would like to learn about or do.

3. **Plan a series of parent-teacher seminars or parent-teacher team-building activities based on survey/interview findings.**

Parent-teacher seminars should consist of at least three sessions so that there is enough time to support ongoing learning, relationship building, and practical outcomes. Seminars should be offered at different times so that parents with varied schedules can attend. While the themes should emerge from participants' survey/interview responses, possible topics for such seminars include the following:

- Learning Standards: What Are They? What Do They Mean? How Do They Support Different Ways of Teaching and Learning?
- Parent and Teacher Expectations for Homework: Too Much or Not Enough?
- Parent and Teacher Communication: What Do We Need and How Can We Do It Better?
- Helping Our Children Become Literate: Basic Overview of Reading Instruction (or Math, Science, Social Studies, etc.)
- Fostering a Love of Reading in Our Children
- Choosing the Right Elementary/Middle/High School
- Standardized Tests and Other Ways of Evaluating and Assessing Children's Progress
- Developing Strong Self-Confidence and Self-Respect in Our Children

While the aforementioned topics are related to the work of schools, seminars can also become forums for serious discussions among schools, families, and communities about mutually significant issues such as violence prevention, resisting racism and other prejudices, sex education in school, dealing with loss, and more.

Finally, seminars can support parents in developing new skills or knowledge, according to identified needs. Workshops on computer literacy, investment strategies, first aid, or legal advice as well as book clubs or service exchanges can provide parents with an incentive to visit their child's school and will underscore the role of the school as a community-based institution.

4. **Assign a family liaison.**

A senior teacher, a parent, a staff member, a group of people, or several different faculty members on a rotating schedule could assume the role of family liaison. The person(s) in this role could be supported through release time, or the school could raise funds to provide small stipends or an activities budget. When someone is in charge of overseeing the process, things are less likely to fall between the cracks.

5. **Develop a school cultural resources binder.**

Who in the school can act as a translator and for what languages? What kinds of culturally responsive parental involvement practices have teachers tried, and what have the results been? What do community organizations have to offer, and how can they be contacted? What are the different restaurants/cuisines in the neighborhood? What about places of worship? Responses to questions such as these should be collected in a binder that can become a resource to teachers, families, and visitors alike.

6. **Create a family space/room.**

Space—big or small—where families can meet, read, talk, or drink coffee can go a long way toward helping parents feel welcome. A dedicated space for parents sends everyone a strong message about belonging.

7. **As a community, generate multiple ways to involve parents in, and inform them about, schools. Commit to at least two of these activities (to start), either individually or with a group of colleagues.**

- Invite parents to join class trips, student presentations, exhibitions, and other activities.
- Welcome parents to simply come and hang out in your classroom.
- Invite parents to come in and share a hobby or to talk about a career.
- Have students write to parents about their activities in your class or in the school.

- Write a letter to parents regularly (each week, every 2 weeks, or each month). The letter could offer a summary of class activities for the previous or following week, describe the homework activities, suggest standards-based activities to try at home, or pose a question such as, "I would like students to learn about X; what are your ideas about this topic?"
- Pick up the phone and call to simply touch base or provide feedback to parents regarding their child's participation, socialization, and academic triumphs and challenges. Calling all parents on a weekly basis would be time consuming and probably unrealistic. Instead, consider a scenario where a teacher has 34 pupils—the teacher could call five parents per week for brief 2- to 5-minute conversations. For families without phones, a brief note could be substituted.
- Invite parents to a potluck breakfast, class snack time, a community dinner, or a group walk.
- Get to know the community by attending a neighborhood event, church, temple, or synagogue or by visiting a community center.

Concluding Thoughts

It would not be surprising to us if readers find our work and recommendations to be common sense. What should be surprising, though, is why such common-sense ideas and strategies are not already in place in schools and in society, where diversity is the norm and not the exception, and where we say every child counts. Most parents like to, and need to, participate in their child's education within the context of a supportive community. If we mean what we say about quality education for all children, then we must put practical strategies into action.

About the Authors

Sabrina Hope King has been a teacher, professor, and school administrator; she is currently assistant superintendent of a diverse school district. A. Lin Goodwin is an associate professor at Teachers College, Columbia University. King and Goodwin have collaborated for many years on projects related to the improved, equitable, and successful education for all students.

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